
**Key Findings**

- In response to a state mandate, Virginia schools established threat assessment teams that conducted assessments of 1,836 students for threats of violence in 779 schools in one school year.
- Although the schools tended to suspend Black and Hispanic students at higher rates than White students across all disciplinary infractions, for those students receiving a threat assessment, there were no statistically significant racial differences in rates of school suspensions, expulsions, school transfers, or legal actions.

**SPR Article Summary**

School psychologists are frequently called upon to assess the risk of violence in students who have made verbal or behavioral threats against others, a systematic process of evaluation and intervention commonly known as school threat assessment (National Association of School Psychologists, 2014). School psychologists may be asked to assess whether a student poses a serious risk of violence and to recommend appropriate safety precautions or protective actions. In 2013, Virginia became the first state to mandate the use of student threat assessment teams in all public schools.

Racial and ethnic disparity in school discipline is a widely recognized national problem (Losen, 2015; Morgan et al., 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Previous research suggests threat assessment might be useful in reducing exclusionary discipline approaches and might not produce the racial disparities typically observed in studies of school discipline (JustChildren & Cornell, 2013).

The SPR article examined disciplinary consequences for students in a statewide sample of schools that are using student threat assessment. Among Black, Hispanic, and White students who received a threat assessment, no statistically significant differences were found in rates of school suspensions, expulsions, school transfers, or legal actions (such as arrest or detention). Students were more likely to receive a suspension, be placed in an alternative setting, or receive a legal consequence if they were in possession of a weapon or made a threat classified as more serious.

These findings indicate that there was racial parity for students receiving a threat assessment. The parity in suspension and expulsion rates for the Black, Hispanic, and White students receiving threat assessments contrasted markedly with the overall suspension rates in those schools. Most notably, school-level risk ratios for all disciplinary infractions showed that Black students were suspended at 3.1 times the rate of White students and Hispanic students were 1.8 times more likely to be suspended compared to White students. However, this general disparity for Black and Hispanic students was not present for the Black and Hispanic students receiving a threat assessment.
School psychologists can help schools to integrate threat assessment into their school safety program. Information is available from the University of Virginia research team. Threat assessment is a safety program designed first and foremost to prevent violence and does not replace the school’s disciplinary process. However, threat assessment places great emphasis on the context and meaning of the student’s behavior, and on helping students to resolve the conflict or problem that often underlies a threat. In this way, threat assessment provides schools with an alternative to a zero tolerance approach to school discipline that applies strict punishment to any violation regardless of the circumstances. As advocates for evidence-based methods, school psychologists can be the champions of safety programs and disciplinary practices that are equitable across racial/ethnic groups and minimize the use of school exclusion.

Next Steps

We are continuing our statewide project to help Virginia schools implement threat assessment and now offer a free online educational program that is available to all schools nationwide. For more information, contact Dr. Jennifer Maeng at jlc7d@virginia.edu.

References


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